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Cities reiterate traffic concerns with 'Science City'

County Council president assures Gaithersburg, Rockville leaders that final discussion is yet to come on Gaithersburg West Master Plan

by Nathan Carrick | Staff Writer

The Rockville and Gaithersburg city councils on Monday reasserted their concerns that the increased traffic from the proposed "Science City" that could be nestled between the two municipalities would be a burden on already congested roads.

In a gathering that many called historic, Gaithersburg's mayor and council and most members of the Montgomery County Council joined Rockville's mayor and council at Rockville City Hall to discuss the possible impacts of the Gaithersburg West Master Plan.

The controversial master plan is a proposed blueprint for turning the Shady Grove Life Sciences Center into a 900-acre live-work development over the next several decades.

Johns Hopkins University, which owns a major parcel in the master plan area, signed a memorandum of understanding with the county in February focused on its desire to build more than 6 million square feet of research, laboratory and office space anchored by a station for the proposed Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT). The CCT would run 15 miles from the Shady Grove Metro station to the Comsat building south of Clarksburg, bisecting the King Farm neighborhood in Rockville.

County Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park tried to quell some of those concerns by telling the group that the plan has not yet gone before the full council.

"In my colleagues' defense, the council has in no way gotten into this yet," she said. "There's a vast amount of information that we review in association with these plans.

"Also, remember this is a master plan," she added. "It's a 20- to 30- to 40-year vision, not a project we're approving or anything like that. People in the community are concerned that actions are about to happen."

Gaithersburg Mayor Sydney Katz told the County Council members that he is worried there would be too much development before transportation infrastructure improvements could be made to handle the increased traffic volumes.

"There's the possibility of getting too much too soon," he said. "What's going to happen here is going to affect, you know, forever. It's imperative we get it right."

Rockville Mayor Phyllis R. Marcuccio said she was not hearing enough about how Metro fit into the plan.

But she was firmly rebuffed by County Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

"I think it's false to rely on Metro and think it's not going to solve everyone's problem," he said. "The idea that Metro is relevant to this is flat out wrong."

County Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, who represents Rockville and Gaithersburg, said while there are some problems in the master plan to be resolved, collaboration between the affected jurisdictions is essential.

"It's clear Rockville and Gaithersburg feel the transportation plan is inadequate and must be addressed," he said. "To this point the planning department has not responded to them."

Andrews also said it appears a calculation in County Executive Isiah Leggett's revenue analysis for the master plan, which came out in October, was flawed.

"There are many deficiencies in the revenue estimates," he said. While the county requires a Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit density of 12 percent, the calculations used just 5 percent, thereby incorrectly inflating the projected revenue from the development, Andrews said.

"That throws off all of our numbers," he said. "Every number in the economic analysis is affected."

Katz agreed that working collaboratively with Rockville and the county will be vital for having a say in the plan, which neither city has any direct control over.

"I'm very hopeful we will be taken seriously," he said. "Now to what degree is yet to be seen."

Marcuccio could not be reached for further comment by Gazette press time Tuesday.

County Council members George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist 2) of Germantown, Dutchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda and Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac also attended, as did the full Gaithersburg and Rockville city councils.